

Article

Australian Media and Islamophobia: Representations of Asylum Seeker Children

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Abstract: Australian media invests considerable attention in asylum seekers and their children, especially those arriving by boat. In this paper, we provide an analysis of Australian newsprint media published during the term of Australia's Gillard's government (2010–2013). This period is critical as it coincides with rising numbers of boat arrivals to Australian shores, fear towards Muslims, and growing Islamophobia. At the time, there were government promises to move children from offshore immigration detention into community-based detention, that would involve living among mainstream Australian society. A data set of 46 articles from major Australian newspapers articles was subject to a discourse analysis of representations of children in both the written texts and in silences. Manipulative tactics of 'risk framing' and 'dispersed intentionality' were identified as discursive acts aimed to confuse compassion and deviancy with respect to asylum seeker children presumed to be from Islamic backgrounds. We argue that this was achieved through binary characterizations in which Muslim parents and people smugglers were constructed as deviant alongside intentional silences, that may have otherwise elicited compassion for asylum seeker children. We propose that this period of media reporting is foundational to understanding the rise of Islamophobic discourses and the implication of Muslim children in Australia.

Keywords: Australia; refugee; asylum seeker; children; deviancy

1. Introduction

Discourses of deviancy pervade media representations, even when asylum seekers are children. In this paper we provide an analysis of representations of asylum seeker children in Australian newsprint media, published over a period of 12 months. The primary focus is of the first year of Australia's Gillard's government (2010–2013). This period coincides with the Australian government's 2010 decision to move children from offshore immigration detention into the Australian community (community detention) (Fleay and Briskman 2013; Wilson 2011). Increases in asylum seekers, including asylum seeker children arriving by boat, was characteristically couched with terms that conflated 'boat people', 'queue jumpers', and 'criminals.' Researchers associated this language as contributing to moral panics in the Australian imagination towards 'people from Middle Eastern backgrounds'; to put it differently, the media representations in news articles predominantly mimicked the discursive structures that underpin Islamophobic discourses of fear and deviancy (Briskman 2015; Martin 2015; Hage 1998, 2014; Poynting 2002; Poynting and Briskman 2018). These discourses permeated Australian society then, and still do. They are central to representations that have likewise reinforced public perceptions that asylum seeker children from Islamic backgrounds, living amongst 'our' Australian children, is something to be feared.

Revisiting this period in Australian immigration history is critical to understanding the foundations of contemporary Islamophobic media reporting and policy responses towards asylum seeker children. This is, even more so, important in the light of more recent government declarations that:

- (1) asylum seeker boats to Australia since 2013 had been stopped (Neumann 2016; Pedersen et al. 2006; Reilly et al. 2014);
- (2) 2019 media headlines such as, *Australia is back on the map for people smugglers* (Stevens 2019) and reporting of, *A boat carrying 20 asylum seekers—including at least one baby. . .* (News Corp Australia 2019), and;
- (3) recent fears of Isis orphans returning to Australia for example, “*There are a lot of people who don’t want them back at all*” (McGiurk 2019).

In contemporary Australian news media, it appears that the representations of asylum seeker children in 2019 are returning to the same old reporting tactics used during the Gillard years. We continue, herewith, by providing a brief on boat arrivals leading up to the 2010 decisions to move asylum seeker children into community detention, before presenting findings and linking back to more recent media representations.

1.1. Lead-Up to Community Detention of Asylum Seeker Children

Asylum seekers arriving to Australia by boat increased from 133 in 2008 to 4940 in 2010 (Phillips and Spinks 2013). Of concern to media were the rising numbers of asylum seekers from places such as Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Iran (The Guardian 2013). Irrespective that people from these countries are of different ethnicities, and various religions, the Australian media tended to uniformly characterize them during these times as Muslim asylum seekers (e.g., Bolt 2009). Media concomitantly held the former Rudd government’s offshore immigration processing strategies as responsible for perceived rising numbers of Muslims migrating to Australia.

Mounting pressure from humanitarians led the subsequent incoming Gillard government to announce a suite of changes to immigration policy (Bowen and Gillard 2010). This included a commitment to move families (mothers and children, not necessarily the fathers) and unaccompanied minors to various configurations of community on-shore detention (McLaren and Patil 2016). Community detention would allow asylum seeker children to attend local schools, shop for their daily needs in local communities and mix freely with Australian children (so long as they met curfew conditions).

The decisions to introduce community-based immigration detention provides a context to analyze media representations of asylum seeker children, as published in newsprint for the duration of Australia’s Gillard government. This time frame offers rich opportunity to explore how discursive practices that mimicked Islamophobic discourses were present in media reporting on the children.

We turn next to reviewing the existing literature on media representations of asylum seeker children. The intention is to scope how scholars have analyzed media representations of asylum seekers and their children, including when from Islamic backgrounds.

1.2. Australian Media Analysis of Asylum Seeker Children

Shee (2016) undertook a discourse analysis of Australian print media on refugee and asylum seeker children. She reported having found no media analysis literature focused specifically on the child. Shee (2016) sample of articles from Australian newspapers covered a six-month period, from January to June 2016. This time period coincided with:

- (1) High Court decisions in February 2016 determining that offshore immigration processing was lawful;
- (2) Government declarations that all asylum seeker children on mainland Australia had been released from immigration detention, and;

- (3) The rise in media imagery of injured, dead or disabled children involved in mass exodus from conflict in Syria.

Shee (2016) examined her sample and identified patterns in quotes and language used to describe asylum seeker children. She coded and counted repetitions, then themed them into “five major discourses; dominant, secondary, subversive, latent and emerging” (Shee 2016). Her major finding was that asylum seeker children elicited more compassion in the media than did the adults. We agree, on the surface, that asylum seeker children may have been relatively absent in Australian media and academic theorizing. With regard to compassion, writers concur that a morality of compassion existed following media images of a dead Syrian refugee child washed upon the shores of the Mediterranean sea (Prøitz 2018; Rosen and Crafter 2018). However, we propose that Shee (2016) failed to consider the discursivity of silence that sits behind written newsprint text, hence the observations made of compassion in her study is incomplete.

In contrast, McLaren and Patil (2016) reported on their media analyses of asylum seeker children in Australia in the same year as Shee (2016). McLaren and Patil (2016) applied Huckin (2002) ‘manipulative silences framework’¹ to guide discourse analysis of text in media reporting. They argued that media employed discursive tools when seeking to influence the public mind, and that influential discourses existed in both what is written (text) and what had been left out (silences) (McLaren and Patil 2016). Huckin (2002) framework enabled textual silences to be understood complementary to a unified system of textual discourses. In doing so, media representations of the asylum seeker parents, people smugglers, criminals and Muslims (text) offered meanings about the asylum seeker children (silences). Others, too, have explored the ways in which media employs textual silences to enable particular discourses to be propagated while concealing other issues (Schröter 2013; McLaren and Gatwiri 2016; Patil and Ennis 2016; Sadeghi 2015).

Huckin (2002) manipulative silences framework suggests that media influences the public mind, voting patterns, the development of immigration policy, reporting on immigration policy, academic engagement, popular discourse, and representations of the children involved. Shee (2016) considered textual silences in her analysis, she may well have concluded that there is little difference in media compassion towards asylum seeker adults or children—there were simply differences in the volume and type of written texts published during that time. In doing so, we suggest that there might be moments when textual representations of compassion are on display. However, the discursive practices (not to be confused with individual intentions of journalists) underpinning these representations and they have generally remained unchanged.

In countering misconceptions that Australian media is compassionate towards asylum seeker children, the current analysis goes back in time to the Gillard government (2010–2013). This is when moral debates over holding children in offshore immigration detention were emerging, and when discourses mimicking Islamophobia were reinforcing fears of having Muslim asylum seeker children mixing freely among Australians children. These discourses, we argue, did and still do exist in media representations—in the written texts, and in the silences.

We suggest that children are embedded in the Australian media representations of their parents, people smugglers, and of Muslims generally. These textual representations of adults must be considered alongside both texts and textual silences concerning the child. An example of research approaches used to analyze relevant media representations in Australian newsprint media is considered, prior to providing a framework for the current analysis.

¹ ‘Manipulative silences are those that intentionally conceal relevant information from the reader or listener, to the advantage of the writer or speaker; unlike other types of silence, these silences depend for their success on not being noticed by the reader or listener’ (Huckin 2002, p. 351).

1.3. Earlier Australian Media Analysis of Concerning Adults, Subsuming Children

Research on news media uses various analytical frameworks to understand how immigration policy affecting ethnic minorities influence mainstream Australian audiences. Perhaps, the best known scholarship is that of Poynting (2002) who detailed cycles of racist moral panics associated with media reporting. These cycles, he argued, serve to criminalize Middle Eastern communities; more specifically, Muslims. Using a comparative method, Poynting (2002) illustrated parallels in the use of Islamophobic ‘constructs of Middle Eastern, crime-prone immigrants, Middle-Eastern queue-jumping and people-smuggler paying boat people . . . [and] Middle Eastern Muslim rapists and terrorists.’ He proposed that media caused moral panics in society by conflating the terms boat people, Middle Eastern and Arabs with the dispositions of criminal and terrorist in the context of the 11 September 2001, attacks on America’s Twin Towers and Pentagon. Since these events, there has been a tendency of media to discursively categorize all those who enter Australia without visa, by boat, as criminal. This has served to collectively position adults and children involved in the asylum seeker trafficking trade, especially those who are assumed to be Muslim, as deviant. In doing so, discourses of fear towards Muslim adults and their children has increased across Australian society.

Similarly, Klocker and Dunn (2003) used propaganda theory to critique the role of media during the Tampa crisis and the children overboard incident—in August 2001 the *Tampa*, a Norwegian freighter, rescued 438 asylum seekers (including 48 children) from a sinking Indonesian vessel. During Australia’s federal election campaign of 2001, the presiding government incorrectly alleged that naval documents contained reports of children being thrown overboard by their *deviant* parents who sought to influence passage to Australia (Jackson 2002). Klocker and Dunn (2003) argued that, during the children overboard incident, the Australian print media ran a series of provocative headlines focused on crisis narratives of the inhumane treatment of children by their asylum seeker parents. In doing so, Klocker and Dunn (2003) proposed that the media’s propaganda model of reporting served to reinforce the Australian government’s negative references to asylum seekers ‘from threat, through other, to illegality and to burden’ served to drive the political agendas and electoral campaigns of the day. These political discourses have foregrounded a pattern of Islamophobic fear mongering and wedge politics, in media, that has driven many federal electoral campaigns ever since (e.g., see Martin 2015; Carson et al. 2016; Richards 2019; Lynch 2019; Leroy 2019; Martinez i Coma and Smith 2018; Muijtjens and Ball 2016; Nguyen and McCallum 2016; Dever and Curtin 2007; Smiths 2009). Inherent are the strong Islamophobic overtones that have influenced not only policy, but also voting behaviours and public outcry.

Shee (2016), and also Bambrick (2016), proposed some level of compassion towards asylum seeker children around 2015 and 2016—indicating a vague, potentially short-lived, paradigm shift in written text. However, both historical and contemporary analysis shows that racist underpinnings have continued to prevail in media reporting of Australia’s immigration policies and of the Muslim asylum seekers effected by them (Poynting and Briskman 2018; McLaren and Patil 2016; Kabir 2006, 2007; Hoang and Hamid 2017; Nolan et al. 2016; Woodlock 2016; Itaoui 2016). Further, critics argue that demonizing media representations of Muslims, terror and asylum seekers has normalized Islamophobia and rooted it right in the middle of the Australian psyche (Briskman 2015; Poynting and Briskman 2018; Abdel-Fattah 2019). It is the media representations of asylum seeker children during the Gillard government’s political responses in 2010 that, we propose, offer foundations for understanding rising Islamophobia. This is irrespective whether the words are inscribed in text or not. The influences of media representations have implications for the wellbeing of asylum seekers, their children and even the next generations of Muslim Australians. Before we begin our analysis, we clarify the sample and methodological framework.

2. Methodological Framework

Our analysis draws from letters to the editor, feature stories, opinion pieces and newspaper reports in Australian print media. In drawing from Foucault’s toolbox (McLaren 2009), we consider

the social role of the media in what Foucault (1972, 1977) calls the production of discourse. What this means for asylum seeker children is that discourses in the language used to describe them, and the discursive silences used to deny them, provides a certain authority in which others also understand them. Foucault (1977) suggests that discourses could be identified by locating repetitions of certain frames of thinking within texts. McLaren and Patil (2016); Huckin (2002) add that patterns in texts also provides insight into media's use of the silences. Analysis should involve the search for repetitions of 'discourses of deviancy' in the language used and in textual silences in reports on asylum seeker adults and children—across the spectrum of articles; letters to the editor, feature stories, opinion pieces, and newspaper reports.

In reading and analyzing letters to the editor, these are often regarded by editors of newspapers as a gauge of public opinion. They act as a medium through which public discourse is treated as 'conducive to the creation of social solidarity' (Wahl-Jorgensen 2001), hence they have importance for understanding the focus of representations made in other media texts. This includes how letters to the editor become reflective of and, also, indicative of the circularity of discourses between columnists, editors and the reading public. We used letters to the editor, the opinion pieces and the subsequent Internet comments—observing these as sites used by columnists, the reading public, and editors to assume positions of speaking on behalf of others and creating 'arenas of discourse' (Schultz 2000). We demonstrate how the opinion columnists speak from a position of an expert for the reading public and blend subjective opinions with beliefs. Their texts play a role in countenancing what Van Dijk (1983, 1993) would call 'evaluative propositions' and 'factual beliefs'. Using this methodological framework allows us to demonstrate how the actions of asylum seeker parents and their children are depicted in media representations. As well, it provides an explanatory framework on how editorials and columnists assume the role of speaking on behalf of the general public in the construction of asylum seeker children.

2.1. Data Sample

The data sample was drawn from five newspapers; *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age*, *The Australian*, *Herald Sun* and *Daily Telegraph*. These newspapers have the largest readership in Australia, and they allow for sampling across the two major media ownerships; Fairfax Media and News Limited. The newspapers were searched via the database *Newsbank Sources*. The Boolean search criteria included terms such as, "asylum seeker" AND "child" OR "children", with a date parameter of 12 months from October 2010. Articles with no relevance to asylum seekers arriving by boat were screened out. The data set of 46 articles consisted of 34 news reports, two feature stories, two letters to the Editor and eight opinion pieces.

2.2. Analytical Technique

The 46 articles were subject to an iterative process of reading and re-reading. The articles were independently searched and coded by the two researchers (Neuman 2003). The themes identified by the researchers were indicative of actions involving 'risk framing' and 'dispersed intentionality' (Huckin 2002). These media tactics appeared to confuse compassion and deviancy via the use of these manipulative silences, as suggested in Huckin (2002) manipulative silences framework. The analysis of the data led to an observance of discursive constructions, which are articulated in findings across three dominant categories. They are constructing fear of the other through binary characterizations, people smugglers-the new enemy, and asylum seeker children's rights to childhood.

3. Findings and Discussion

Government announcements of moving children from off-shore immigration detention to community-based detention ranged from factual and rights based to alarmist reporting in the print media. For example, Grattan (2010) in *The Sydney Morning Herald* highlighted limitations to the children's and vulnerable families' rights and freedom. Similarly, *The Age* featured a news article

documenting the life of an Australia citizen (former refugee who came to Australia by boat); a teacher who used his migration stories to teach compassion towards the rights of children in countries affected by war (Butterworth 2014). In comparison, *The Australian* (Karvelas and Maley 2010) emphasised risk to the community as a result of 'boat people being at large.' Some news articles positioned the announcement of community detention as part of the government's legal, moral and ethical responsibility to asylum seeker families and their children. At the same time, these news articles acknowledged the contentious and fragile nature of the immigration debate in Australia. They framed this in terms of the rise of mostly Muslim asylum seekers arriving by boat over previous years. Eight newspaper reports were related to government policy and asylum seeker children, of which four were critical of the Gillard governments' immigration policies. An additional eight news reports indicated success of previous governments in keeping 'boat people' out, contrasting this with the perceived mismanagement of the former Rudd government. Six news reports, however, were critical of the Gillard government's failure to stop asylum seeker families and children arriving by boats, as well as for policy shifts that would see these people being hosted among the Australian community.

Feature stories provided lengthy explanations on the opinions and positions of a range of stakeholders. Across the newspaper sources, the opinion pieces were variably supportive of asylum seekers and opposed to 'boat people'. For instance, in *The Age* used the terms 'asylum seeker children' or 'refugee children' in favorable reporting as opposed to 'boat people' in demonizing representations. Another report in *The Age* was critical of the government and reported on the abuse that asylum seeker children living in the community faced (Whyte 2014), but confused compassion by the inclusion of many voices with competing dialogues. Most of the reporting across national and city-based newspapers, however, constructed asylum seekers and their children as deviant, rule breakers and colluding in taking advantage of the Gillard government. *The Age* was more critical of government policy, highlighted the impact detention has on children, and used language that detention of asylum seekers was de-humanizing. Nearly all articles (reports, feature stories, letters to the Editor and opinion pieces) made references to the growing number of asylum seekers arriving by boat. Obsession with numbers appeared to create a sense of being overwhelmed and out of control, thereby silencing the moments in which media texts had some compassion.

The initial analysis identified three areas of discursive activity informing fear, deviancy and children's rights (e.g., risk framing, Huckin 2002). Indicators of discursive construction within each included:

Discourses of fear:

- Represented by provocative framing. Examples included 'chaos' and 'crisis'
- Discussion about national threat. Examples included 'our borders' and 'us' versus 'them'
- Obsessing about quantities of boat arrivals. Examples included 'waves of boats' and 'cramming on boats.'

People smugglers as the new enemy:

- Examples included criticisms of people smugglers for allowing so many children on the boat, and for the parents for putting their children's lives in danger
- Rights of asylum seeker children
- Denial of rights of asylum seeker children in the context of the 'illegal' activities of people smugglers and their parents
- Positioning asylum seeker children as 'deviant' as a result of their threat to Australian children's rights for an Australian education.

3.1. Discourses of Fear: Politics of Nationhood

The media reporting on asylum seeker families and children drew on nationalist discourse and belonging. News reports in the *Daily Telegraph*, *The Australian* and the *Herald Sun* used the terms

‘illegals’, ‘boat people’ and ‘asylum seeker children’ synonymously. These metonymic slippages served to take the human face of asylum seekers and of the child away. This process of othering embeds within its logic of inclusionary and exclusionary frameworks (Every and Augoustinos 2008) that demarcate *belonging* in the national imagination. This characterization set up the discursive markers of difference and delineated the modalities of dominant nationalism which Hage (2014) argues is located within whiteness.

Some news reports were provocative in their characterizations of the Gillard government’s decision to move children into community-based detention. An editorial in the *Daily Telegraph* (Editorial 2010) noted that the government ‘was struggling to control illegal arrivals’ and added rhetorically, ‘Will they ever stop?’. Other news reports, such as in *The Australian*, similarly commented:

... yesterday’s decision to release hundreds of families into the community will do much to ease the massive pressures on Australia’s detention network but nothing to address the causes of those pressures. And with 5258 people in detention, it is a crisis (Maley 2010).

The decision to move asylum seeker children into community detention, coupled with increasing arrivals of Muslim asylum seekers by boat, blurred the lines between Australia’s humanitarian obligations and upholding criminal activity. The characterization of children in these news reports as contributing to the “crisis” caused by “illegal” activity allowed justification of the abrogation of the Australian government’s legal and moral obligations towards asylum seeker children. This differentiation is important because it signifies category membership. Category membership demarcates moral entitlements and this affects identity (Meân 2012); asylum seeker children are, hence, not positioned as genuine refugees by association with criminal activity and associated identity construction. Manipulative tactics of ‘risk framing’ and ‘dispersed intentionality’ (McLaren and Patil 2016; Huckin 2002) therefore locates the children as undeserving of freedom and living normal lives among mainstream Australian communities.

As well, newspaper articles represented asylum seekers as willing participants in the people smuggler’s trade in which children were implicated. A letter to the editor in *The Australian* makes this point:

... When news gets to the ears of the people-smugglers that families with children are to be automatically released into the Australian community... Children could be seen as providing free tickets into the Australian community ... (Williams 2010).

Pickering (2001) argued that the clients of people smugglers are represented as different to everyone else who seeks entry to Australia. Children are construed as the merchandise of parents, and part of the problem of smugglers in their ‘illegal’ transactions. Tactics of ‘risk framing’ and ‘dispersed intentionality’, by association, means that the children are likewise represented as deviant. This is despite their innocent involvement and despite adverse effects of public backlash towards them. As a result, mode of entry to Australia appeared to matter in the public psyche more than the reason for peoples’ seeking of asylum, which had a significant impact on determining children’s worthiness of Australian’s humanity.

Many newspapers used the words ‘waves’, ‘crisis’, and ‘chaos’ to describe reasons for the Gillard government’s decision; another act of ‘risk framing’ in which the children are silently situated (McLaren and Patil 2016; Huckin 2002). Even news articles that agreed with the decisions emphasised rising number of asylum seekers. *The Sydney Morning Herald* columnist, Grattan (2010), argued that the ‘announcement was positive... [but] the planned expansion of accommodation is an admission that the number of asylum seekers coming is not going to lessen any time soon.’ Many newspaper articles noted that the Gillard government had few options but to move children into community-based detention, also noting the government’s announcement as an admission of immigration policy failure. The media kept referring back to former right-wing governments and their ‘tough policies’ on immigration, in contrast with the failure of left-wing politics being due to the enabling nature of Rudd’s, then Gillard’s, ‘soft policies’ (McKay et al. 2011). An Editorial in the *Herald Sun* (Herald Sun 2010) proposed:

Looking back, it was John Howard's tough stance that slowed the arrival of boat people from a flood to a trickle, before Kevin Rudd overturned the policy and the asylum seekers arrived in a torrent.

The media obsession with raising concern about the number of asylum seekers arriving by boat drew strength in its rousing of public debate to influence government policy directions. This is consistent with Klocker and Dunn (2003) analysis of how media power sets the discursive markers in Australian immigration debates.

One news report in *The Australian* advocated for the rights of asylum seeker children, such as to have access to teachers and education (Guest 2011). However, most news reports highlighted public anxiety over asylum seeker children sharing schools with Australian children. In a news report titled, 'Refugees to 'harm' kids' education' (Schliebs 2010), as an example, *The Australian* noted how the people interviewed did not want Australian 'kids' to be affected by the poor English language skills of asylum seeker 'kids'. Hage (2014) suggested that for asylum seekers to be accepted in Australia, they need to be perceived as more 'like us' rather than 'like them'. Describing asylum seeker children as 'their kids', provides justification to discriminate against the children in association with the adults—coincidentally, asylum seekers were perceived to be largely Muslim at the time.

3.2. Discourse of Deviancy

Language use in newspaper articles demonstrates a material power in representations of asylum seeker children. The construction of binaries defined these children as 'Other' in an oppositional relationship to the self (Foucault 1972); with the self being constructed by media in ways that influenced social discourse on what it meant to be Australian. This binary allowed for the attribution of deviancy to asylum seekers, the children and the people smugglers. Balibar (2007) noted that this construction of identity, where the self maintains distance from the 'Other', is a deliberate process of cultural incommensurability. In the Australian context and on asylum seeker debates, media representations are deeply embedded within construing the 'Other' through the lens of Islamophobia (Saniotis 2004).

These references were obvious in the *Daily Telegraph*, *Herald Sun* and *The Australian* reporting of the decision of the government to move asylum seeker children into the community. The decision was constructed in words, such as 'chaos', 'crisis' and 'failure', and by extension a loss of control of national borders and national identity. *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* noted the government's actions as a humanitarian decision, but the same reports highlighted the rising cost of looking after asylum seekers as economically burdensome. Corlett (2000) research on media representation identified that anxiety about the 'unwanted illegals' and 'parasites' was fueled by fear of cost to the taxpayer. All the newspapers, in the light of obsessive reporting of increased asylum seeker numbers, calculated the cost of opening new community detention centers. Australians were led to believe that that they were picking up the cost of supporting asylum seeker children in community detention.

Hall (2002) noted that binary constructions allows for the production of an ethic in which one group of people are constructed as normal and others as deviant. The sense of 'normal' as opposed to 'deviant' provides discursive possibilities for talking about 'us' and 'them'. The newspaper reports, by characterizing in the first instance the government's failure to stop 'boat people' as a crisis, laid the foundation for asylum seekers and the children in community detention to be represented as taking advantage of the chaos to serve their own end. This subtle shift from government failure, to the behaviour of asylum seekers' families and children, characterized the latter as illegal and thus deviant. The headlines indicated that asylum seeker children were to live 'among us' or to be 'free' to roam among the Australian community, which reinforced notions of the asylum seeker as 'Other' and as something to fear.

Klocker (2004) concept of 'territorial ownership' and white anxiety (Hage 2014) speak to the Muslim *Other* in the Australian imagination. This helps to explain an anxiety represented in news reports. The news reports problematized children as a deviant population by making reference to 'hundreds of families' to live among 'us' (Maley 2010), and emphasized the volumes of boat people children moving into communities. These representations, made by the media, imposed upon

community members a sense of lost ownership of their place and space. For example, such sentiment is expressed in the following letter to the editor in the *Daily Telegraph*:

They are not refugees, they paid their way. Just turn their boats around and send them back. Why doesn't the Federal Government hold a referendum and let the people decide who comes here. Please, I ask the people of Australia to agree and flood The Daily Telegraph with support. We don't want them here (Mr Dudley 2010).

Using language as a discursive method helps to justify distances between the self and *Other*. The repetition of language of deviancy is central to the production of discourse. Media's manipulation of discursive 'silences', in addition, serves to reinforce the discursivity of that which is written/said. Discursive representations arising from news reports, demonstrated next, indicate media's role in protecting Australia's national character. The image of an asylum seeker, arriving by boat, is even more so demonized when they are viewed as a 'Muslim encroacher' (Saniotis 2004). These debates generally center around two themes: the 'unethical business model' of the people smugglers under which children are 'illegal', and; criticism of the parents for putting their children on boats to illegally enter Australia. The following is a representative example from Andrew Bolt, a columnist with the *Herald Sun*:

I wasn't alone in believing Labor's mad changes would put the people smugglers back in business... I'm guessing they will figure that if they board boats with their children, they'll be out of detention and into church care within weeks of arrival. All they'll now need is the courage to load the boats with more children for the voyage here. And the rest of us must prepare for the bills—and for tragedy' (Bolt 2010).

Bolt (2010) suggested that moving asylum seeker children into community detention would reward people smugglers and encourage them to send more. This was reinforced in another report in *The Australian*:

... unaccompanied children who arrived by boat were seen as an anchor to secure safe passage for family (Legge 2011).

Other news reports referred to the illegal behaviour of the people smugglers who took advantage of policy changes, for example this statement appeared in *The Sydney Morning Herald*:

... people smugglers have thrown down the gauntlet to the Gillard government ... crowding the first boat ... [with] 19 children, including 14 unaccompanied minors (Needham 2011).

It could be argued that news reports talk about the plight of children to highlight the illegality associated with the people smugglers' 'business' (Bolt 2010) model. The news reports used the children to strengthen their arguments on the gravity of the deviancy in the parent-smuggler trade. In the media, asylum seeker children's human rights were largely ignored. The parents' use of children became a means to justify and normalize opposition to boat people. Labelling, naming and shaming were heuristic tools employed by newspaper reports in making these representations. This suggests a deliberate discursive field of relations which continually seeks to reinforce deviancy by using language and the integrity of the nation-state as signifiers.

A few media articles analyzed the discriminatory nature of Australia's detention policy on asylum seekers, but what was missing from the media were the children. This silence is powerful, in that it rendered the children as unimportant or not noteworthy of rights considerations. Most articles were disinterested or disregarding of how various government announcements impacted asylum seeker children (e.g., manipulative silence). The news reports on asylum seeker children simply located them as a means to an end for the parents, and as a means to argue for stronger regulations to combat asylum seeker families engaging in illegal activity. Though a few news reports commended the humanitarian

aspect of the Gillard government's decision to move children into community detention in mainland Australia, they noted the global and political complexities involved in immigration decision-making. Some alternative humanitarian voice was not strong enough to compete against hegemonic discourses that pronounced the associations of asylum seeker children and their parents with deviancy.

4. Conclusions

Researchers analyzing immigration policy in Australia have variably employed theoretical lenses that include moral panic theory, propaganda models, historical, semiotic, and discourse theory. Those focused on asylum seekers, particularly 'boat people', largely consider the intersections between immigration policy, media analysis related to asylum seekers and influence on the public mind (for example, see [Poynting 2002](#); [Klocker and Dunn 2003](#); [Kabir 2006](#); [McKay et al. 2011](#); [Betts 2001](#); [Poynting and Noble 2003](#); [Slattery 2003](#); [Macken-Horarik 2003](#)). Asylum seekers have continued to be represented in Australia media through lenses of deviancy by couching it in terms of 'burden on the taxpayers', 'incommensurable with national identity', and 'fear of Islamophobia'.

We suggest that newspaper articles employed various metaphors to maintain the national character of the Australian nation-state by subtly framing the increase of asylum seeker children as 'pawns' in the people smuggler trade. The implication being that children were not deemed genuine asylum seekers by association with their families who deliberately used them to take advantage of the 'soft' policy of the Gillard government. This meant that news reports were able to construct children as deviants by confusing compassion and deviancy in the representations of all subjects as active in an 'illegal trade'. This is what [Huckin \(2002\)](#) calls 'dispersed intentionality', which allows for the news reports to ignore the discriminatory aspects of community, and other forms of immigration detention of children that are repeatedly raised as significant in Australian national inquiries ([Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 2004](#)). By ignoring, e.g., silencing, media representations serve to shift the public mind towards constructions of deviancy.

The discursive text that represented asylum seeker children in news reports was designed to challenge the legitimacy of their status in implicit and explicit ways. They were referred to in a few news reports as 'their kids', as opposed to children with vulnerabilities and protection rights. This is aimed to manipulate reductions in compassion in the public mind. Such discursive representations in news reports legitimize questions about the genuineness of claims of asylum seekers that were children of 'illegals' or 'criminals'. Very few news reports examined the impact of the Gillard government's decision to move asylum seeker children into community detention on the Australian mainland. Even less considered the wellbeing of asylum seeker children in respect to children living among Australians who positioned them as deviant. What reporting tended to do was to create doubt and confusion in the broader community. Racist representations were not directly associated with asylum seeker children; however, the children were subtly framed within discursive frameworks that mimicked moral panics associated with Islamophobic discourses ([Poynting 2002](#); [Kabir 2007](#))—those that permeated Australian media representations around the September 9/11, 2001 attacks in Australia.

Revisiting media reporting from 2010 on Australian immigration exposes the reemergence of discourses of fear relating to boat arriving asylum seekers. The very recent media reports mentioned at the beginning of this paper suggests that media's demonizing of asylum seekers and their children has not gone away, nor has compassion towards the children increased. There has simply been a shift in balance between texts and silences, achieved through media tactics that include 'risk framing' and 'dispersed intentionality' ([McLaren and Patil 2016](#); [Huckin 2002](#)). This was evident in the reemergence of textual discourses in Australian media, reiterated here, as "Australia is back on the map for people smugglers" ([Stevens 2019](#)), "A boat carrying 20 asylum seekers—including at least one baby. . ." ([News Corp Australia 2019](#)), and, specifically relating to Muslim ISIS children, "There are a lot of people who don't want them back at all" ([McGiurk 2019](#)). These phenomena are not unique to the Australian context. Recent observations are made of punitive immigration policy decisions made by the Trump

Administration in the USA, where asylum seeker children are being separated from their families and detained at separate sites (Wood 2018).

Our study demonstrates that asylum seeker children, in the main, are the subjects of discourses of deviancy—not directly, but by association with the ‘parents’ and the ‘people smugglers’. This ‘manipulative framing’ was identified as the predominant discourse in media reporting in the sample under study. This is despite a few news reports raising issues related to Australian human rights obligations, the denial of rights, and adverse impacts on asylum seeker children. Finally, we suggest that the media representations of asylum seeker children are embedded within discursive practices that are deep rooted, historical, and socio-political. In exposing the discursive operations of ‘manipulative framing’, this shines a light on the manipulative acts of media reporting in texts and in silences. These discursive acts, we conclude, are underpinned by an intentionality that serves to maintain Australia’s nationalist political ends.

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